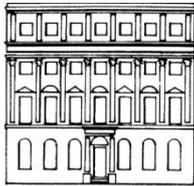


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*Objects and Emotions Exhibited: Two Catalogues on Raub und Restitution*

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### ***OBJECTS AND EMOTIONS EXHIBITED: TWO CATALOGUES ON RAUB UND RESTITUTION***

CHLOE PAVER

INKA BERTZ and MICHAEL DORRMANN for the Jüdisches Museum Berlin and the Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt am Main (eds.), *Raub und Restitution: Kulturgut aus jüdischem Besitz von 1933 bis heute*, exhibition catalogue (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2008), 326 pp. with 135 ill. ISBN 978 3 8353 0361 4. €24.90

ALEXANDRA REININGHAUS (ed.), *Recollecting: Raub und Restitution*, exhibition catalogue (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2009), 349 pp. ISBN 978 3 8516 5887 3. €34.45

These two impressive catalogues document exhibitions which investigated the systematic dispossession of German and Austrian Jews under National Socialism. The exhibitions from which the two catalogues have taken their respective titles focused on the theft or forced sale of art objects and other personal possessions such as books and furniture, that is, on the *Kulturgut* which has been the subject of the latest wave of restitution cases (as distinct from the properties, businesses, life savings, pensions, and insurance policies that were likewise stolen but whose restitution was generally dealt with, if at all, before 1989). As the shared wording 'Raub und Restitution' signals, both exhibitions were concerned not simply with the fact of the theft but with the fate of the objects and their owners, or their owners' surviving descendants, after 1945. The exhibition *Raub und Restitution* was organized jointly by the Jüdisches Museum Berlin and the Jüdisches Museum der Stadt Frankfurt am Main, and was shown at these two museums in 2008 and 2009 respectively. *Recollecting* was mounted by MAK, Austria's museum of the applied arts, in the winter of 2008–9.

How can we account for the coincidence of timing and titles in Berlin and Vienna? While the author of this review did not visit the

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exhibitions and is therefore reviewing the catalogues as books in their own right, she can briefly set them in the context of the many hundreds of German and Austrian exhibitions which, over the last ten to twenty years, have explored aspects of the National Socialist past and its legacies. Exhibitions about looted possessions form an interesting sub-category of this corpus.

Important exhibitions appeared in Austria in the wake of the restitution law of 1998 which obliged state-run museums to conduct thorough provenance research on their holdings. Conceptually, the most interesting of these exhibitions were *Inventarisiert* at the Austrian state furniture depot (exh. cat. Vienna, 2000) and *Jetzt ist er böse, der Tannenbaum* at the Jewish Museum Vienna (exh. cat. Vienna, 2005). *Inventarisiert* acknowledged the furniture depot's institutional responsibility for thefts from which it had profited by refusing to exhibit objects to which it now believed the depot had never had a moral right. Instead, a photographic installation kept the objects, many of them degraded by decades of use in state-owned properties, at a distance from the viewer. By thus breaching the normal contract between museum and visitor—the unspoken promise of access to objects—the exhibition aimed to promote reflection about rights of possession and the right to view. *Jetzt ist er böse, der Tannenbaum* ranged more widely across Austria's inadequate post-war responses to the Holocaust, but restitution, or the lack of it, was a central theme. The curators used parodies of children's games, in which visitors were invited to participate, to provide a sarcastic comment on the bureaucratic obstacles that were wilfully put in the way of those survivors or descendants who attempted to reclaim property in the immediate post-war decades. It is no surprise, then, that one of the two catalogues under review here represents a further—and more elaborate—Austrian attempt to tackle this topic in the museum.

Restitution activity was also revived in Germany in the wake of the Washington Declaration of 1998, though by means of a joint declaration of the *Bund* and the *Länder*, rather than by a change to the law. There has since been a whole series of local and regional exhibitions about the 'aryanization' process, testifying to the now well-established tendency to 'localize' the memory of National Socialist crime in Germany. This has included a series of exhibitions by university libraries (most recently at the universities of Leipzig and Göttingen) about looted books in their collections. The no-nonsense

term *Raub* was arguably established in 2002 by *Legalisierter Raub: Der Fiskus und die Ausplünderung der Juden in Hessen 1933–1945*, a regional exhibition mounted by the Fritz Bauer Institute. *Raub und Restitution*, the German exhibition catalogue reviewed here, brings similar research to a national audience.

Of the two catalogues under review, the German *Raub und Restitution* is the more conventional, offering a thorough historical documentation of the theft and restitution of cultural artefacts, with contributions by almost forty academics and museum professionals. The contents page presents the myriad contributions visually to the reader as a series of layers of information, while in the catalogue itself these are picked out in different coloured paper. The 'top' layer comprises what one might call 'meta-texts' on the exhibition: two general essays about the processes of theft and restitution, one by historian Dan Diner, and a series of interviews with people involved in current restitution activities (academics, art dealers, lawyers, and so on). These are interspersed between fifteen case studies of theft from individuals or institutions, detailing the often unsuccessful attempts to achieve restitution after 1945; and these, in turn, are interleaved with detailed historical analyses of institutions involved either in the theft or in national processes of restitution. While this layering may appear over-elaborate, it does make visible the underlying structuring principles of what might otherwise seem a loose collection of texts on diverse aspects of theft and restitution. The inclusion of interviews with academics and other experts is consistent with other recent attempts (for instance at the *Topographie des Terrors* exhibition in Berlin, opened in 2010) to present history as an ongoing process of dialogue between academics rather than as a set of agreed facts whose authority the visitor is invited to accept.

In their introduction to *Raub und Restitution*, the editors Inka Bertz and Michael Dorrman argue that their exhibition moves beyond a simplistic appeal to the viewer's admiration for notable stolen artworks, which they see as a characteristic of earlier (unspecified) exhibitions. Instead, they set out to document and analyse the looting processes, broadening the subject out from the few well-known cases of stolen paintings to include case studies of stolen books, archives, ceramics, and musical instruments as well as essays on theft and restitution in the occupied territories. The catalogue brings to light many lesser-known details: the competition between the RSHA and

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the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg for first access to lootable property in the occupied territories; the SD's practice of stealing libraries and archives, including Jewish libraries, in order to study how the 'enemy' thought; the role of the American Collecting Points in collating, cataloguing, and restituting or re-distributing art objects after 1945; and the international diplomacy involved in France's offer to return Russian documents that were in the possession of the French state to Russia in exchange for the return of stolen French archives.

One potential limitation of the documentary approach taken by the German exhibition is that the emotional consequences and legacies of dispossession are treated only peripherally. Nevertheless, emotion forms an interesting minor thread of the catalogue's argument: not, as one might expect, the emotion of the Jewish victims of dispossession (perhaps because their emotions were not recorded during the persecution; perhaps because it was felt they would have a distracting sentimentalizing effect), but rather the emotion of the non-Jewish German majority. In their introduction, Bertz and Dorrmann speak of the resentment aroused by restitution among the majority population. They express concern that cases such as the restitution of *Berliner Straßenszene* by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner in 2006 may revive a latent anti-Semitic notion that the *Kulturnation* is a more trustworthy custodian of art treasures than Jewish owners, for whom an art object supposedly has only commercial value. The Kirchner case, which becomes something of a leitmotiv in the catalogue, was clearly fresh enough in public memory at this time for the editors not to feel the need to spell out the story's ending: the sale of *Berliner Straßenszene* for over 30 million dollars. In one of ten interviews with professionals involved in restitution cases, the editors speak of the 'great emotionalism' that the case aroused in Germany; the interviewees are asked, directly or indirectly, what they think about the owners of restituted objects selling them on the open market, whether the descendants and their lawyers are only interested in money, or whether the descendants can really claim a link to the victims if they are only distant relatives. By taking seriously feelings of anger and loss felt by many in the non-Jewish majority as art works disappear from public possession and public view in Germany, the two Jewish museums that mounted *Raub und Restitution* evidently hope to guide public discussion towards a more reasoned understanding of the inevitable conflicts of feeling involved. Accordingly, the interviewees

generally counter the popular emotional responses in reasoned tones, citing legal, moral, and pragmatic arguments while also acknowledging the irreconcilability of opposing claims.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the two Jewish museums are attempting to close down the arguments by asking leading questions of their interviewees. In fact, the responses are unpredictable. Art dealer and auctioneer Henrik Hanstein expresses irritation at the way in which descendants fight for artworks only to then sell them, rather than valuing them as objects that had belonged to their parents and grandparents. This behaviour, he claims 'creates an atmosphere that is, in my view, not entirely conducive to solving the problem as a whole' (p. 55). Leo Hepner, a descendant who was able to retrieve a portrait of his grandfather and now accords it pride of place in his home, criticizes those who sell their restituted objects immediately, arguing that the objects should stay in the family for at least one generation before their owners are allowed to sell them. Interestingly, he regrets in particular that descendants have no emotional ties to the objects: 'Often the families do not even like the art, they feel no affinity with it. But we are talking about pictures that were collected by people who loved them, derived pleasure from them' (p. 111). One might counter that the lack of an emotional bond to the possessions of an older generation may be precisely a logical consequence of traumatic displacement, separation, and untimely bereavement; but the key point here is that by using the non-academic interview format the exhibition-makers leave the points of friction unresolved. At the same time, Leo Hepner's story, which is also dealt with in the final case history, may be said to offer the reader something of an emotional resolution in as much as he is a rare counter-example of a descendant who, rather than selling a painting that was restituted to him, paid for it, taking a pragmatic view that since he would have difficulty proving the details of his mother's claim to it, it made more sense to come to an arrangement with its owner.

The catalogue for the Viennese exhibition *Recollecting* has a similarly layered structure to its German counterpart, with different categories of information and commentary interleaved rather than being presented in blocks. Twenty case studies of theft or forced sale, picked out in red on the contents page, are interspersed between images and accounts of thirteen artworks (twelve of them commis-

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sioned for the exhibition), while fourteen academic essays provide a commentary on the issues raised by the exhibition. Like the German exhibition, *Recollecting* moves beyond the cliché of the spectacular stolen painting (though paintings are well represented) to encompass stolen books, enamel buttons, and even a car, while one essay, by Miriam Triendl-Zadoff and Niko Wahl, reminds us of the everyday objects such as sheets and cutlery that have largely become unidentifiable as 'aryanized' objects despite making up the majority of stolen goods. Compared with the German exhibition, the Austrian one shifts the emphasis from history to memory and – though this is by no means a given in Memory Studies – to emotions. In her introduction, the editor and curator Alexandra Reininghaus states explicitly that her aim was to explore the emotional legacies of the thefts, not for the original owner, but for the descendants: 'The main focus was . . . on the subjective and emotional significance of the restitution of artworks and everyday objects to the descendants of their former owners' (p. 11). The exhibition appears to have engaged with these emotions in two ways: by documenting interviews with owners or descendants through videos or quotations; and by inviting artists to approach the topic subjectively. Whether the artworks are really emotional or rather cerebral, criticizing Austria's inadequate reparations (too little too late, as one piece has it), is difficult to tell from the catalogue, but some involve an encounter and dialogue with descendants. Nevertheless, in the catalogue at least, the emotional component emerges more clearly from the written contributions.

Harald Welzer argues that objects have a 'mnemonic energy', but sees this as a double-edged sword: objects from the past can not only help fulfil an intention and desire to remember, but can also 'ambush' and 'burden' people. For Aleida Assmann, the objects with which we surround ourselves are not dead, that is, solely material, but rather 'the pulsing periphery of our person, intimate and alive in equal measure' (p. 149). Perhaps the most interesting contribution in this context is by historian Nicole L. Immler. She points out that – contrary to the impression created by this exhibition and its German counterpart – the restitution of objects is a rare exception and that the much more common 'solution' to cases of loss of property or of life chances is the award of financial compensation. She summarizes her work interviewing survivors and descendants about what financial compensation has meant to them. Although she records positive

examples in which compensation claims help families to re-activate family stories or to open up inter-generational dialogue, her examples are less up-beat and more complex than those in the *Raub und Restitution* catalogue. A cruel husband shows unwonted sympathy for his wife by supporting her compensation application, for instance. Some victims find it difficult to admit the need for compensation because it means revising the positive survival narrative they have constructed for themselves. And for one second-generation interviewee, applications for compensation payments are an opportunity to confront her mother over what she sees as the emotional scars that her mother inflicted on her as a child.

Although for the most part the focus is on the experiences of the survivors and descendants, Rudolf de Cillia and Ruth Wodak report on a research project which investigated, amongst other things, the attitudes of majority Austrians towards restitution. Outlining the results of a series of group discussions about restitution held in 1995 and then again in 2006, they show that opinions about restitution often follow a 'Yes, but . . .' model, in which the necessity of making reparations is acknowledged in principle, but financial compensation is rejected as unnecessary or unfair. Not surprisingly, Austria's counterpart to the restitution of Kirchner's *Berliner Straßenszene*, the case of Klimt's portrait *Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, plays a role in the exhibition. Perhaps precisely because the public emotions at its 'loss' (that is, its return to the exiled surviving descendant of its former owner) were much stronger than in the case of the Kirchner painting, it is not allowed to dominate here. Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer appears as one case study among many, but with the focus on his porcelain collection (some of which had been unjustly acquired by the MAK). Nevertheless, artist Ines Doujak tackles the subject head-on in her installation *Adele* (2008). A plain petticoat hangs discarded on a chair, surrounded by piles of postcards stamped with the words 'Ade, Adele'. These recall the posters distributed around Vienna in the months before the painting left Austria, whose slogan 'Ciao, Adele' encouraged the Viennese to take one last look at the painting. In this way, Doujak evokes the arguably manufactured 'mourning' for the painting in 2006. Whereas the exhibition makers of *Raub und Restitution* are prepared to engage with such public feelings, Doujak appears to reject their sentimentality outright: the postcards show 'Adele' not in Klimt's fabulous patterned dress and cloak but in the

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flesh-coloured slip and black boots, sitting prosaically on an office chair, while in an accompanying collage Adele's body is placed in an uncomfortable dialogue with the body of Emmy Göring.

Both catalogues are richly illustrated. Apart from images of the stolen objects and their original owners, *Raub und Restitution* contains intriguing images of documents unlikely to be known from elsewhere, such as the 1951 cartoon from a Jewish magazine entitled 'Mensch, ärgere dich nicht über die Wiedergutmachung!' (p. 33) or the 1955 Pan Am advert assuring customers travelling to Germany for their restitution claims that they will be served kosher food on board their flight (p. 255). *Recollecting* has the inestimable advantage over its German counterpart of showing images of the exhibition space. Between the commissioned artworks (mostly installations of one kind or another), stolen objects (or in some cases reproductions of them) are presented in display cases that imitate archive shelves, surrounded by contextualizing information. This draws attention away from their art or curiosity value and towards the process by which they were incorporated into museums and archives after 1945. The *Recollecting* catalogue also contains a series of photographs by Rainer Granahl showing some of the stolen objects in the spaces that currently house them: sometimes in museum storage facilities, far from their original domestic setting, sometimes restored to a very personal domestic setting—above a writing desk, on a bookshelf among post-war paperbacks—after years unjustly sequestered in a museum or archive. This implied movement between the home and the museum and back again is also a visual and conceptual motif in several of the commissioned artworks.

Although the academic work that will advance our knowledge of theft and restitution is likely to continue to be carried on outside the exhibition room and inside universities, these catalogues do more than simply draw this subject to the attention of a non-academic audience in a popular form. They attempt to bring different academic, professional, artistic, and public discourses into contact with one another, and *Recollecting*, in particular, acknowledges—more than previous Austrian exhibitions on the topic—the centrality of the emotional dimension in the loss of personal property and the fight for its return.

*Objects and Emotions Exhibited*

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